

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON
AMENDMENT 28 – ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT AND
ROCKFISH CONSERVATION AREA – IMPLEMENTATION UPDATE

The Habitat Committee (HC) discussion on revisions to the draft Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) Amendment 28 noted potential concerns about revisions to the FMP that refer to Council Operating Procedure (COP) 22. Kerry Griffin informed the HC that COP 22 would also be revised as part of Amendment 28, and that it would be applicable to all FMPs. The HC finds it difficult to fully evaluate the proposed FMP changes without knowing how COP 22 will be revised.

In particular, proposed deletions in Sections 6.2.4 and 7.2 of the FMP would eliminate the existing process for modifying or designating habitat areas of particular concern (HAPCs) as new information or concerns arise regarding sensitive and vulnerable habitats. For example, while the Council did not designate methane seeps as EFH during the last EFH review, new information is being gathered about fish associations with substrate-forming methane seeps that may warrant designating these habitats as EFH to help conserve them in the face of emerging deepwater mineral and gas exploration interests.

The existing HAPC process highlights the opportunity for interim HAPC designation outside the full EFH review process. The HC recommends that COP 22 indicate that an interim HAPC designation process is still an option. The HC also recommends that revisions to COP 22 be available before the Council adopts the proposed changes to the FMP.

Section 6.2.4, Habitat Conservation Framework, provides the framework for the EFH review process that will apply to *future* reviews. For instance, the proposed revisions call for the Council to establish a set of objectives for the process, and remove the requirement for an EFH Oversight Committee. The HC recommends that the FMP specifically differentiate the process for future reviews from the process used in the recent review and the resulting revisions. Additionally, an appendix that details the current review process would inform a future EFH process. This could describe the major decisions and criteria applied, and the processes for the Essential Fish Habitat Review Committee, scoping, public-proposal development and evaluation, and preferred (and final preferred) alternative selection.

To inform future EFH review processes and revisions to the COP, the Council would benefit from input on the current review process from Council advisory bodies and the public. This could be done by directly soliciting input from the advisory bodies for incorporation.